

Crafting Empathy

Project Description

My M.A. Qualifying Paper argued that Janine Antoni's performative objects constituted a "material culture of empathy." But what does that mean, exactly? Antoni's process often involved making dynamic and tactile traces on malleable materials like chocolate, lard, and soap using egalitarian movements like gnawing, licking, winking, washing, and mopping. In claiming Antoni's work as a material culture of empathy, I sought to capture and describe her practice that produced objects whose surfaces embodied the intimate labor of their maker.

"Empathy" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1895 and was conceptualized as "the ability to understand and appreciate another individual's feelings," as well as "mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation." Even the Victorians seemed to understand the relational structure of "feeling into" another individual or thing. Then, as now, the "identifying oneself with an object" aspect of empathy is not an easy or comfortable feeling. Rather, empathy can be a destabilizing to one's identity—softening the discrete boundaries of one's physical and emotional being. To investigate this phenomenological experience, my Crafting Empathy project is oriented around a two-pronged research question: What can crafted objects teach us about care, trust, and collaboration? And how might these same objects continue to perform as channels for affective and activist work, outside their maker's control?

I believe empathy is a transcendent and ordinary experience. This project seeks to explore the connection among craft, empathy, and process through conversation and art making. I have chosen people within my social and professional networks to build our own "material culture of empathy."

Interview Questions

1. What does empathy mean to you?
 - a. What feelings do you associate with the word, "empathy"?
 - b. How do you show or communicate empathy?
 - c. How might you describe the difference between sympathy and empathy? Are these two sensations different?
2. Tell me about a recent time when you experienced empathy. It can be anything: an interpersonal experience, or an experience with an object...
 - a. What do you turn to when you're looking to feel something/empathy? People, music, literature/words, food, objects, movements, places...
3. Describe a making process that you have. Has there been a time when you wanted to make, or infuse an object with sentiment?
 - a. Can you think of a time when empathy was a part of your making practice?
 - b. Has there been a time when empathy has been a part of your craft process or product?
4. Describe an object in your life that is a touchstone for empathy. How does it perform empathy for you?

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(Optional) Making Prompts

1. Make a still life of empathetic objects that you own. [This can be a photograph, collage, textile, food...]
2. What does empathy look like? Create an empathetic portrait. [This can be visual or written...]
3. What does an empathetic object look like? Create your own empathetic object.
4. Have you already made an empathetic object? Describe how your object promotes or has been shaped by empathy.